

Panther Recovery Implementation Team (PRIT)
Transportation SubTeam
Meeting Minutes

January 28, 2020

Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) District 1 Office, Bartow, FL

Attendees:

Katasha Cornwell
Amber Crooks
Elizabeth Fleming
Gwen Pipkin
Don Scott
Brent Setchell
Dan Smith
John Wrublik

Guests/Members of the Public:

Lee Amos
Mark Cantrell, USFWS
Kristin Caruso
Vivianne Cross, FDOT
Chris Dailey
Jason Lauritsen, Florida Wildlife Corridor
Nicole Monies, FDOT
Lauren Peters, FDOT
Tom Pride
Gary Ritter, Florida Farm Bureau Federation
David Shindle, USFWS

David Shindle, FWS staff liaison update

- No update since core team is on pause due to 5-year status update. David's time is also busy with the Eastern Collier Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) and the 5-year status update/Species Status Assessment (SSA). Brent asked about timeframe for 5-year status update. The draft has been completed and peer reviewed. Next step is recommendation team meeting (RTM). The team will discuss any proposed recommendations. That meeting is targeted for March 2020. Any recommended change would need to be vetted up to DC. And it also would have to be noticed in the Federal Register. SSA itself doesn't make a recommendation, the SSA provides the scientific foundation for any decision making.

Elizabeth Fleming, Core team liaison update

- Subteam gave a presentation about I-4 to Core Team in October and got a request to move forward with a report about that presentation.

- Elizabeth wanted to acknowledge that 6 panthers have been hit by vehicles and trains in 2020 so far this year. David said that it isn't easy to draw conclusions about what the numbers will look like at the end of the year. He went over some of the locations of these mortalities: another two panthers hit close to SR82 Panther Creek area. First confirmed panther hit by train in Florida. David doesn't know where the panther that got hit at I-75 MM82 got onto the road. That driver had a dash cam. David said this is evidence that "even when you are going the speed limit there is not much that you can do with an animal darting out in front of you at night."

Jason Lauritsen, Florida Wildlife Corridor presentation

- Goal as an organization is to make a real and protected corridor.
- Modeled after Florida ecological greenway network (FEGN) priority 1 and 2.
- 7 million acres within the corridor are not yet protected. They documented 111 bottlenecks less than 1 mile wide.
- The latest Florida Wildlife Corridor Lake Wales Ridge trek was from October 20-26, 2019. This area was close to where the panther got hit by the train in Frostproof. They worked with f-Stop to get some cameras set up in that area. The team crossed US 27 at a box culvert. They have documented bobcats, skunks, etc. using that culvert. No panthers yet.
- Current priorities are to update FEGN data set (that data is from 2013 with only targeted updates since then). Would like to have a formal designation of the corridor (signage) etc. Would like to see increase funding for acquisitions (fee simple and CE).
- Jason showed a map of blue FEGN priority 3, which shows Myakka linkage up to Saddle Creek and I-4.
- Jason showed FEGN modeling with some possible crossings and structures in place, particularly in the Peace River area corridor up to I-4.
- Jason highlighted the need for crossing structures at US 27 at Lakes Wales Ridge and also at US 27 to the west of Lake O north of Fisheating Creek.
- Jason suggests design elements following Dan's literature review.
- There was some discussion about the pink areas of Jason's map. It appears to be showing Thatcher model locations (potential areas that could support panthers) that don't overlap with corridor Priority 1 and 2 FEGN.
- One of the females north of the Caloosahatchee River might have been the panther with neurological disorder. They believe she had 3 litters and none of those kittens survived. There has been recent evidence of another female reproducing, but those don't appear to have survived to independence either.
- David and Dan would like to get collared females north of the river.
- Jason has some photos on private lands north of the Caloosahatchee that could be useful to the agencies. If they have permission and are willing to share, USFWS would view them. Could also add them to FWC panther sighting database.
- Amber asked what were the dimensions of the culvert they used to cross 27? The answer is 8x3 foot. There are also 8x4 culverts close by.

- Amber added that the Subteam has reached out to Tom Hocht to present to the Subteam. Amber mentioned that the Subteam worked on the Southwest Florida Hotspots report (which we will be updating), had received a request by the Core Team to focus on permeability at I-4, and is now working to identify potential connections where panthers can cross.
- Katasha asked about formal designation for the corridor. Jason said doesn't intend for it to be regulatory. Would like to focus the designation on the "opportunity area" identified. Similar to birding trail or scenic trail.
- Dan wanted to let Jason know about a FDOT and FWF projects, which includes a statewide modeling project to identify hotspots on roads, an inventory of existing bridges and structures to evaluate capability to work as wildlife crossing, as well as a wildlife crossing design manual.
- David would like to discourage the use of camera work that uses LED to illuminate the crossing entrances.

Keri Road and Corkscrew Road report

- Dan provided a presentation about his recent study "Assessing the Value of Current Movements Pathways of Florida Panthers that Intersect Keri and Corkscrew Roads: Identifying Locations and Need for Safe Crossing Measures" (August 19, 2019 revised final report).
- It appears that the panthers are crossing Keri Road/Hendry CR832 at the OK Slough State Forest area that follows the pine island land cover areas.
- Study put out 99 cameras along 28 road segments, as well as walking surveys to identify large animal trails. Target species were panthers, black bear, bobcat, and deer.
- Study also looked at access roads, adjacent canals, land cover, native shrub/tall grass cover, foot or bicycle or vehicle traffic, % tree cover, clear zone width, distance from camera cluster to road centerline.
- Keri Road: Target species were most abundant at 1, 4, 9 (panther); 0, 1, and 4 (black bear), and 2, 3, 10 (deer).
- Corkscrew Road: Target species were most abundant at 11, 14 (panther); 14 (black bear); 9, 10, 12 (deer).
- Recommendations: Keri Road has low traffic volume. May be harder, according to Dan, to justify crossings and fewer vehicle collisions in the last 5 years on the west side near the state forest. There are five sites on Keri Road that need to be remedied. Dan recommends crosswalk type animal detection/warning system. Lighted warning signage with enhanced speed enforcement.
- Elizabeth says that Hendry County Commissioners adopted the speed zone in December 2011.
- Amber said that although Keri Road is low volume traffic, but was an orange hotspot in the 2017 report, and a crossing structure would be preferable.

- There was discussion about the difference between RADS and crosswalk. Animals getting trapped in the roadway? This uses electromat or electrified concrete to keep animals going straight across. Dan says these are 99% effective, based on studies in western states. David said he was unsure about its use with pumas as opposed to ungulates. Dan says that bears and panthers have used it in Arizona. Dan says that this system is more intelligent than the RADS. Can't have heavy vegetation near these systems. It needs to be tested.
- FDOT new contract and one of their items is to refocus on RADS. Elizabeth said she would like to have this as an agenda item at a future meeting.
- Amber asked about how long the fencing would be? Open ended crossings have about 500-1000 feet in each direction. Or until the next driveway.
- Amber mentioned that the site design as shown in the report is now different for Verdana Village.

Public comment

- Gary Ritter asked Jason Lauritsen about cooperation from landowners. Push back or cooperative? Jason said that everyone has asked about conservation easements of about 12 landowners, about 1-2 that hadn't yet applied. Some of them already had them, some of them not highly ranked or scored, and trying to facilitate their application with Rural and Family Lands. Long waiting list.

Hotspots Methodology Update

- Brent went over the results of the hot spots methodology that was updated from the 2017 run. 500 m buffer to all the collisions, took out rural roads and Alligator Alley that has fencing, kept all the data. Amber asked if the rural roads that were exempted included Church Road where a roadkill occurred. Shannon said that Church Road was included in the model and wasn't exempted.
- Results:
 - Red areas (hottest spot) includes Turner River, SR29 lands north of the FPNWR, and CR846 east.
 - Orange areas (second hottest spot) includes CR846 Immokalee Road near Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, Golden Gate Blvd., Immokalee Road to the west of Twin Eagles, and SR29 at Owl Hammock curve.
- Differences from 2017 model run:
 - Owl Hammock turned from red to orange
 - Keri Road from orange to green
 - SR82 from orange to green
- Dan says he likes the new methodology. Shows problem segments more specifically.
- CR846 east crossing is within the red area.
- Very narrow ROW in the north-south CR846 orange segment. No nighttime speed restriction in that area currently.

- SR80 green area – somewhat low vertical clearance shelves under Townsend Canal near C43, however, FDOT recommended improvements by SR80 bridge. The project is being constructed by SFWMD and construction has begun on the wildlife shelves under the existing bridge.
- Green spot east of 951 on US41. FDOT put shelves on Henderson Creek, but so far only fishermen shown on camera footage.
- Brent noted that the most recent Eastern Collier HCP doesn't have a connection for SR82 at Under Canal. Dan says in his study the panthers were routinely crossing at Corkscrew Road access road. They aren't able to use the culvert there and then use the access road and canal. His recommendation is to replace culvert on Corkscrew Road to something larger. Brent asked John if a new version of the HCP was available to see if FDOT's recommendation for improved land preservation for this corridor was made. John said to contact Chuck Kelso at USFWS who is the project manager for the HCP.
- Amber will take the first stab at updating Hotspots Chart.
- Amber said that the Subteam should brainstorm about how to address hotspots that are in the urban area. There was a discussion about how to address hot spots in the urban area like Golden Gate Blvd. Golden Gate Blvd went from 2 kills to 6 kills in one year (within a 5 mile area). It is already 45 mph in the area. Ideas include: lighted sign like in Turner River area might be able to be used there per Dan. Panther sign in that area? Speed feedback signs? Illumined? Amber, and any others from the Subteam that are interested, can participate in a working group to make a suggestion for improvements on these local roads.

Sharing of Information

- Hurricane fencing repair –
 - Tentative completion date is March 2020. They are prioritizing the Alligator Alley wildlife fencing segments. If there are any issues after March 6, notify Brent.
 - Bridge fencing got holes cut in them and they have been repaired.
 - Amber asked about connectivity within the fenced area east of the toll booth on I-75 Alligator Alley. Brent said that f-Stop Foundation is monitoring box culverts west of existing wildlife shelves. They will monitor for the next 6 months and then FDOT will move into planning and design for resurfacing project (which would start about 6 months from now). FDOT exploring structure near Ford Test Track, as well as creating a land bridge over the canal where there are existing culverts.
 - Elizabeth asked about sign not working on US41 near Collier Seminole. Brent says that it should be resolved.
- Eastern Collier HCP –
 - Elizabeth said that the USFWS is currently reviewing. Tom said he can reach out to AECOM to see if they have an update. Horse Trails connector widened,

up to about 1500-1700 feet wide. Brent had also suggested extending that connector up to the cluster of roadkills north of Owl Hammock.

- MCORES –
 - Mark Cantrell gave an update (and Gary Ritter and Don Scott left the room for this discussion). Next meetings are scheduled for February 11-13. Events are posted online. Working on next step of putting areas on a map. Ultimately recommendations and final report by August to be finalized by October. January-February timeframe for alignments.
 - Amber asked about process. The answer was that USFWS has provided technical advice and has been available to answer questions. At some point, after October recommendations, FDOT will be sending out proposal for formal regular permitting/planning process.
- FWF, FDOT wildlife crossing manual –
 - Katasha updated that the team has agreed on target list and methodology. Beginning to do the model work. Looking to schedule a meeting to discuss the wildlife crossing manual the end of February.

Cost Surface Mapping/Least Cost Pathways

- Dan may have this available for Subteam review in the next week. After that will come evaluation and drafting of the report. Dan may need some assistance in putting together the report. Dan would like for this to be shared with M-CORES and agencies and Mark said that it would be helpful.

I-4 cont.

- Brent and Dan are going to redo Amber's exhibits in the report and put the text near the exhibits for each area. Brent will also make exhibits that show the adjacent roadways.
- Dan is finishing the LCP so can add to the Plant City area crossing exhibit.
- Elizabeth suggests running a draft past David Shindle to get feedback.
- The I-4 report will get finalized in about a month over email. Next will come finalizing the LCP project. A subsequent task is to identify adjacent roadway projects that have an opportunity coming up. The Subteam can narrow down which opportunities/challenges are worthy of following by using the LCPs.
- In order to round out our discussion on I-4 permeability and corridor, we can invite other agencies. We want to share the Subteam's work, as well as gather information from these other entities about potential nexus between our respective work.
 - Who to invite:
 - Ricardo Alvarez would be interested in talking with the Subteam further per Dan. He works on the FDACS Rural and Family Lands program.
 - State lands /ARC representative.
 - Brent will reach out for a meeting with City of Lakeland and Polk County. He will invite the Subteam to participate.

Public comment

- Gary suggests that we include Chad Allison of the Central Florida planning council who is working on the sentinel landscape program. He also suggests overlaying Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) and Everglades restoration (CERP) into our plans.

Next meeting will be held April 29, 2020

- Future agenda: Turner River US 41 RADS, noted presenters and entities re I-4.